

Postgraduate Work-based learning programmes in English Higher
Education: exploring case studies of organizational practice

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Published in *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 2009, Vol. 61, No. 2,
pp.169-182.

Abstract

The first part of the paper outlines and discusses the nature of work-based learning (WBL) and WBL programmes, and the overall direction of government strategy towards WBL programmes in Higher Education (HE) in England, with particular reference to postgraduate programmes, policy documents and the WBL literature. Drawing upon case study research, the paper then presents an overview of the postgraduate WBL programmes offered by three English universities. There follows a presentation and analysis of the views of teaching staff and managers with respect to the operation of these programmes. A number of benefits were identified, including flexibility, student career development, and student's enhanced influence over the learning process and content. A number of problems were also identified, including a lack of awareness of, interest in, and resistance to the programmes on the behalf of the wider university academic community.

Keywords: work-based learning; higher education; government policy; practice.

Introduction

The paper compares and contrasts government policy and strategy towards postgraduate work-based learning (WBL) programmes in England with the exigencies of practice and the views of providers at the local (that is, university) level. It draws upon case studies undertaken at three universities, interviews with Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) staff and an examination of key policy documents. Staff involved in the provision of postgraduate WBL programmes at the universities reported that a number of benefits were being obtained from these programmes, including financial ones for the universities and career enhancement and a deeper involvement in shaping the programmes for the learners. At the same time, once one moves outside the cohorts of dedicated postgraduate WBL providers and support staff within these universities, one finds a general lack of interest in and awareness of the programmes as well as forms of resistance to the programmes. This all takes place within wider inter and intra organizational contexts which can act to place constraints or 'inhibitors' upon the further development and expansion of WBL programmes.

The paper thus focuses upon practice in organizational contexts, recognising that relevant actors shape and configure practice within those contexts and within the constraints and opportunities that present themselves. Thus, for example, one would expect to find both some variation in views about practice and differences in actual practice itself between different members of staff and organizations in the same broad institutional (that is, university) context. We were particularly interested in the extent to which policy gets translated into organizational practice, and, given that we found that this occurs to only a

limited extent, what were the key inhibitors to a more extensive adoption of postgraduate WBL programmes within the universities concerned.

The first main section of the paper addresses the question 'What is work-based learning (WBL)?' The paper then turns to an examination of government strategy towards postgraduate WBL programmes in Higher Education (HE) in England. These were bespoke partnership programmes which had been designed by the university, employer and student, called 'Type D', 'Learner in the workplace' programmes by HEFCE (2006a, 2006b), where the focus is upon the learner's/student's work role and links to HE. Following a methodological note on our case study research, we then outline the postgraduate WBL programmes offered at three universities. The next main section presents and discusses the views of contributing staff on the operation of these programmes, under the two main headings of the benefits and problems identified. The paper ends with a concluding discussion.

What is work-based learning?

Work-based learning in higher education can be defined in many ways from work placements to a field of study in its own right and the following section provides some insights into a range of definitions and practices.

Boud *et al* (2001, p. 4) define the term WBL as 'being used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces.' They see WBL programmes as possessing the following six characteristics:

- a partnership between an external organisation and an educational institution is specifically established to foster learning
- the learners are employees of, or are in some contractual relationship with, an external organisation
- the programme derives from the needs of the workplace and the learner, rather than being controlled by the disciplinary curriculum, because work is the curriculum
- the programme and the educational level of participants is established after learners have engaged in a process of recognition of competencies and identification of learning needs (rather than relying on educational qualifications)
- learning projects are undertaken in the workplace
- the educational institution assesses the learning outcomes of the negotiated programmes with reference to a framework of standards and levels which are transdisciplinary.

In essence, then, with 'WBL degrees, work is quite literally the foundation of the curriculum...the activity from which learning arises and by which learning is defined' (Boud and Symes, 2000, p. 21).

WBL within higher education can be defined as a planned programme of accredited learning in a higher education context, which can include undergraduate placements, distance learning programmes and sandwich courses. The real difference between work placements and structured work experience, which generally form part of an instruction led university based

programme of study, and employment based learning programmes, is whether the workplace is at the centre of the individual's programme of study. Portwood (2000b, p.18) has made a case for WBL as a subject discipline, arguing that it emerges '...primarily from examining the concept of the learned worker, which is understood as a combination of intelligent scepticism and focused intelligence.' He sees 'intelligent scepticism' as critical to the purposes of higher education, as it '...questions taken-for-grantedness through exposing and challenging assumptions and examining alternatives. It highlights the contradictions and paradoxes in our ideas and systems' (Portwood, 2000b, p.19). 'Focused intelligence' is the intelligence of an expert and an attribute of an individual learned worker, invariably has a team-working focus, and is market-orientated as it needs to grasp opportunities and enhance its specialisation. Portwood (2000b, p.20) describes the parameters of focused intelligence as follows:

The quality of focused intelligence is thereby gauged by the fitness for purpose of its products whose production has involved collaborative activity. Consequently current interest in the development of transferable skills is a reinterpretation and broader appreciation of what is involved in focused intelligence. Nonetheless, it remains closely bonded to and bounded by its related academic discipline especially when the expertise is controlled by a licensing authority and/or professional body.

Portwood observes that as WBL is in its infancy, the research portfolio is small and the claim for subject status must be taken on trust. Despite this, he argues that WBL ‘...re-draws the epistemological map of higher education because the boundaries of disciplines are at most partly relevant to the spread of knowledge workers need in their work roles within an organisational setting’ (2000b, p.17).

Developments in work-based learning

To initiate our discussion of the above we will review the English national policy framework for work-based learning programmes. In order to do this it is important to review the government strategy for higher education contained in ‘The Future of Higher Education’ (DfES, 2003) and a HEFCE Strategy document (HEFCE, 2006c).

The strategy for higher education in England (DfES, 2003) incorporates a number of key developments relating to the future of HE which were intended to shape the growing relationship between business and HE institutions and, in particular, the future provision of WBL in HE.

The White Paper identified a number of priorities, including building stronger links between universities and business through ‘third stream funding’, and the rapid expansion of the number of Foundation degrees on offer, which was expected to increase the number of employer and university partnerships. The development of Foundation degrees is a key priority within the White Paper, as the government wants to make them the main work-focussed qualification in higher education. The drive for a two-year sub-degree qualification

negotiated and designed in conjunction with employers comes from an anticipated skill shortage at the 'associate professional' and 'higher technician' levels. The main challenge highlighted by the government here is the prejudice with which vocational qualifications are viewed by employers:

Work-focused higher education courses focused on this skill level have suffered from social and cultural prejudice against vocational education. Employers claim that they want graduates whose skills are better fitted for work; but the labour market premium they pay still favours three-year honours degrees (DfES, 2003, p.61).

The government hoped that its' provision of financial incentives for universities and colleges to develop vocational programmes such as Foundation degrees would act as a stimuli to change in employer's traditional patterns of demand. The emphasis, then, on forming partnerships between HE and companies is indicative of the government's drive to grow the knowledge-based economy, which, it argues, is dependent on the effective sharing of knowledge between business and HE and leads to improvements in economic competitiveness and quality of life. The HEFCE strategy recognizes that one of the key risks of this approach is that universities do not respond effectively by developing approaches which respond sufficiently to the needs of business and the community. HEFCE recognises that more needs to be done: reference is made to its need to explore incentives for employer-funded HE in order to address the 'employer engagement agenda', and to strengthen the links between HE and employers, and promote opportunities for WBL and lifelong

learning. It has set a target for the proportion of HEIs reporting high levels of employer engagement to increase to 80% by 2009 (HEFCE, 2006c).

Human capital theory involves 'thinking in terms of human value (and performance) as a return on investment in a cost-to-benefit ratio...a way of viewing the preparation of workers to meet the labour requirements of a market economy' (Garrick, 1999, p.217). The human capital vision of HE has influenced government policy to such an extent that, according to Scott (1998), it has come to dominate government policy not only in the UK but across much of the developed world. Universities face some significant challenges if they are to meet this agenda. As King (2004, p.131) has pointed out: 'Doubts have continued about the ability of the universities to reform their curricula and research orientations to more explicitly facilitate economic growth and to deliver what employers want and, in part at least, this helps to explain the growth of private and corporate universities in the 1990s.'

The influence of central government on British HE has steadily increased over the last three decades in areas such as funding, research and management. Consecutive governments have questioned the value of HE in relation to developing and supporting the economy. The main thrust of UK government policy towards HE since the 1980s has been to emphasise the economic importance of education, and how universities should and can work with industry. The government- sponsored Leitch review of skills in the UK made a strong human capital-oriented case for action:

The global economy is changing rapidly, with emerging economies such as India and China growing dramatically, altering UK

competitiveness. The population is ageing, technological change and global migration flows are increasing. There is a direct correlation between skills, productivity and employment. Unless the UK can build on reforms to schools, colleges and universities and make its skills base one of its strengths, UK businesses will find it increasingly difficult to compete...Skills were once a key lever for prosperity and fairness. Skills are now increasingly the key lever. A radical step-change is necessary (Leitch, 2006, p.3).

A number of consequences follow from the drive for vocational education in a mass HE system, such as the development of a new vocabulary for curricula. Terms such as 'transferable skills', 'enterprise', 'outcomes', 'capability' and 'work-based learning' have emerged (Barnett, 1997a). The development of WBL programmes in HE has been in part the result of a demand from students and employers for this type of programme, and we have seen the emergence of more vocationally- based provision within many universities and a wider policy agenda, whereby universities have been encouraged by government to forge alliances with business organizations. One of the Leitch report's main recommendations is to 'Improve engagement between employers and universities. Increase co-funded workplace degrees' (Leitch, 2006, p.5). Symes (2001) has observed that this has meant that the 'instrumental' has become more favoured than the 'liberal', and that the changes have been profound:

The recent changes to higher education, arguably as dramatic as any that have occurred in the whole history of the university, have

led to a repositioning of higher education in society. Much of this repositioning has been policy driven, with governments in the Western world, particularly in the UK and Australia, demanding that higher education modernize itself and align itself to the economic needs of the contemporary nation state. Roderick West in Australia...and Lord Dearing in the UK produced reports on higher education that articulated the need for more work-oriented universities (2001, 205).

The shift towards more 'business-oriented' universities implies that the differentiation between the university and the workplace, in terms of learning at least, will increasingly narrow. According to Portwood (2000a), the rise of WBL in the UK has been due to a) the realisation by employers that meeting the staff development needs of their employees in a structured way is becoming increasingly essential in a global economy, and b) the recognition by universities of the potency of the work role within its organisational setting as the focus for learning. In other words, there is a curriculum in the workplace as well as in the academy.

We now turn to report the findings from our case studies of the operation of postgraduate WBL programmes in practice at the university level, following a brief methodological note, and will conclude the paper with a discussion which compares and contrasts the above review with these findings.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was deployed, using semi-structured interviews with national senior policy advisors and documentary analysis of policy papers, along with case studies based upon three English universities which were operating postgraduate work-based learning programmes. The initial phase of the primary research process involved the examination of documentary materials such as the White Paper and HEFCE Strategic Plan referred to above, and semi-structured interviews with two policy advisors at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

The stratified purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990) involved selecting a particular sector, i.e. universities, and purposefully choosing cases in each. In the case of two of the universities, interviewees were drawn from postgraduate WBL programmes based within the Business School, whilst the interviewees from the third university were from the School of Lifelong Learning and Education, which has a centre specialising in WBL programmes. The academics selected for interview at each university were a senior manager within the school/university with responsibility for WBL; the Dean or Deputy Dean or their equivalent within each school; the WBL Programme Leader; and a WBL academic with teaching and management responsibilities related to WBL programmes.

In addition, access was granted in all three universities to relevant documents, such as strategic and operating plans and WBL programme documentation, on the understanding that these were to be treated as confidential. Thus data was gathered from interviews and documents, involving a range of

stakeholders at each university. Analysis of the data was undertaken on a within-case (comparing the findings from the relevant actors involved in each university's postgraduate WBL programmes) and across-case basis, with the latter facilitating the analysis of the influence of different 'micro' contexts, histories and programmes.

Postgraduate WBL programmes in three English universities

University A

University A is a post-1992 university in the North of England and has a history of involvement in widening access initiatives. The Business School, where the interviews took place, had been involved in a number of programmes with a strong WBL element, such as a Masters in Management Practice (MMP), Certificate in Management, and NVQ level 4/5 in Management. The MMP is indicative of the type of WBL programmes which had been offered, and, along with the MBA (Public Management) programme which superseded it, was the focus of our empirical research at university A. The WBL programmes have proved particularly attractive to supervisors and middle managers, whose entry qualifications are usually management or other professional programme certificates, rather than a first degree. Many of the participants have a number of years of management experience and use the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APEL) process to help them enter directly onto a later stage of the programme. The MMP programme has some distinctive features, as outlined in the course document:

The key differences between this model and the traditional approach to learning is that the organisation or individual takes greater responsibility for identifying learning and assessment opportunities; the learning takes place at a time, location and speed that is different from traditional courses; and there is more flexibility available to design specific learning outcomes that reflect the overall outcomes appropriate to the programme.

A number of students on the MMP programme came from the local authority, and received named awards at the postgraduate certificate and postgraduate diploma levels. The award was replaced by the MBA (Public Management) in 2001- a qualification designed for public sector staff, but with a stronger emphasis on taught modules. This was developed following feedback from the local authority to the effect that that they wanted a modular programme which incorporated recent changes such as the 'modernisation agenda' within local government.

University B

University B is another post-1992 university, based in the South East of England and the programmes of study offered differed from the other universities as the Centre Director pointed out:

I think we are quite distinctive because of the focus on work places being the content of the knowledge production rather than it being

the case of university knowledge being transferred into the work situation.

The WBL programmes offered by the Centre at University B are built around three stages: learning review and planning, project design, and project implementation. The first stage involves an evaluation of prior learning called 'Recognition and Accreditation of Learning'; the second part, 'Planning Work Based Learning', involves the design of a personal WBL programme in negotiation with the student's employer and the university, and leads to an individual learning agreement containing the proposed study plan. Stage Two centres around the design of a proposal for a real-life work-based project, and the third stage involves the implementation of the project in the workplace.

This partnership approach to WBL is usually triggered by university accreditation activity, which involves an exploration of the forms of learning to be found in the organisation, and how they might be systematically quantified and used within the programme.

The study focused on the public sector MA programme where students could negotiate their degree title. An average of ten a year entered the MA programme. The majority are middle managers or above, and most of them have previously studied for academic qualifications such as a management certificate or first degree, and have relevant prior learning.

University C

University C is an ex-Polytechnic based in the South of England, and has a long history of providing WBL programmes across the university. The WBL

programmes case study research was based in the Business School, and the focus of the research was the MSc Contracts Management, which was said to be typical of the School's corporate WBL programme. The programme is targeted at junior and middle managers. The participating company owns the programme for three years, when it reverts back to the university, which can then develop it as it wishes. The MSc Contracts Management is an example of the Business School's fast-track 'Integrated Flexible Masters Programme', involving an 'Employee learning contract', that is, a formalised agreement between the employee, the university and company mentor setting out the programme plan. The Business School's programmes, such as those outlined above, are primarily designed for corporate clients.

The learning process on WBL programmes is managed via a learning contract with each student, which focuses upon work-based assignments. The contract is the vehicle for managing the quality of the learning process, and the contract has to be agreed between the three parties involved: the student, their workplace mentor, and the Course Tutor. The contract, according to the Associate Dean at the School:

is a measurable tool, which can be used to see whether the programme is meeting the needs of the student. The learning contract is viewed as a living document because things can change rapidly and the contract needs to be dynamic so it can meet changed priorities at work.

The learning contract acts, in effect, as a tracking document for the whole WBL process, so, in the view of the staff we interviewed, flexibility needs to be built in, as employers would object to a system that was too rigid.

WBL practice and staff views in the three universities

As the ensuing discussion will show, whilst we found that those members of university staff who had a direct involvement in postgraduate WBL programmes generally talked about them in positive terms, in the wider academic community there was a lack of awareness and/or interest in them and, in some cases, outright resistance. Also, a number of constraints impacting upon the growth potential of WBL programmes were also identified by our interviewees.

Benefits of WBL programmes

A number of positive outcomes from WBL programmes were identified by the university staff we interviewed, and they can be summarised under the headings of: financial benefits to the university; flexibility; career development for the students; enhanced influence over the learning process and content for the student.

With respect to financial gains to the university, these were said to have accrued at universities A and C through the extra revenue brought in by the students enrolling onto WBL programmes. Whether this represented a net gain after staffing and other resource costs are taken into account, we do not know as we were not provided with this information.

In terms of flexibility, the programmes at university C were seen as helping partnership working with local employers, and triggering the development of alternative approaches to teaching and learning. The learning contract (see above) on WBL programmes allows all parties to reflect upon whether the programme is meeting the needs of the student at any given point in time. In a sense, it acts as a monitoring device which tracks the built-in flexibility of the programme, not least in relation to changing organizational priorities and contexts.

At university B, the Postgraduate Curriculum Leader emphasised how the employer can vary the programme to meet their organization's needs, whilst the Head of Research pointed out that WBL offers customised programmes to a diverse range of clients and is not simply there to meet the vocational needs of particular employers:

A heck of a lot of them [the students] are just individuals who belong to an organization, or who are doing a project in the public sphere. It is not just about employers, and I think we need to steer work-based learning away from the idea that it just has a vocational focus.

The latter observation that students were developing themselves personally as well as professionally were echoed by the WBL academic at university A, who said that, based upon feedback from students and employers, there was general satisfaction with the WBL programmes; this overall positive feedback

being in terms of the quality of the teaching, relevance to the workplace, and the encouragement given to students to be more reflective.

The Curriculum Leader at university B stressed that many of the students commencing programmes at the Centre had not come through the traditional academic route (with many of them not having a first degree), and were seeking recognition and accreditation for their work and organizational experience.

With regard to WBL programmes leading to career development for students, the Programme Leader at university A commented that a number of the students who completed the former MMP programme had gained promotion as a result. At university B, research has been carried out into the effectiveness of WBL programmes from the students' and employers' perspectives. The Head of Research said that the feedback has been positive: '...it has given them self confidence, it has progressed their career.' She also pointed out that the final work-based project helped experienced practitioners on the programme '...in a work situation using evidence-based practice and informed knowledge about how to make decisions about change.'

Finally, in terms of the main positive outcomes reported for postgraduate WBL programmes, students were said to be able to take control of their own learning and link it to their professional development, whilst generating/obtaining knowledge of value in the workplace. The following observation of the Director of the Centre at university B is indicative:

I think the lasting benefit is making them a more effective work based learner so that they are better able to cope with the changing demands of the workplace. They are able to be, in their own right, knowledge workers, to be knowledge creators, users and they are far better equipped in that role from the work based learning programme.

Many of the university staff we interviewed were of the view that the form of learning experience on WBL programmes had acted to transform the careers of many students and enhanced their personal development and learning in a number of ways.

Challenges for WBL programmes

The challenges reported to be facing postgraduate WBL programmes are discussed under three headings: lack of awareness and interest in the wider academic community, resistance, and constraints.

1. Lack of awareness and interest in the wider academic community

Our case study findings point to a strong message coming from all three universities in the study: there is a general lack of awareness of WBL developments amongst academic staff. At university C, the Business Development Director said that 'two thirds of the Business School staff would not know much about the WBL programmes the School offers'. Even at university B, which, as we noted earlier, has a Centre specialising in WBL programmes, the Head of Research commented that 'it had taken ten years for people to start to notice that the Centre exists'.

WBL programmes within British HE form a minority of the overall provision, with only a small number of academics contributing to them. It is also worth noting that 'learner in the workplace' programmes demand a particular set of skills which may be in short supply in HE. As the CHERI/KPMG report (HEFCE, 2006a: 33) noted:

...the nature and extent of negotiation needed between the higher education provider, the learner and the employer to create an acceptable programme requires a set of skills which 'traditional' academics may not possess. The complex brokerage skills required to establish an agreed programme of activities and provide ongoing support to the learner provide but one example.

It is important to emphasise that the comments above came from staff at universities which have an established reputation for WBL provision, implying that there may well be even less awareness and interest at other universities which have not put the same level of attention and resources into such programmes. Our findings thus concur with those of Reeve and Gallacher (2003, 202), who have argued in their study of WBL partnership programmes:

It would appear that WBL developments within universities in the UK are still limited and marginal. There are clearly some examples of UK institutions where WBL has become a significant form of provision, and Middlesex University and Portsmouth University are often quoted in this context. However elsewhere in the UK, even in

the new post '92 university sector which emerged out of the more vocationally oriented polytechnics, there is little evidence that WBL has become a major form of provision in many universities.

The Higher Education Academy study of work-based learning practice in UK HE found that (2006, 16):

Perceptions of work-based learning show that it is still seen by some as belonging to more vocationally oriented institutions. It is very much a contested area felt by many to be the preserve of particular disciplines and outside this it tends to be a bit of a 'cottage industry' supported by enthusiasts.

This lack of awareness of WBL is indicative of how WBL has failed to have any significant impact other than in highly localised, circumscribed cases. There is hence a disjuncture between government policy and practice in this area which as Keep (2006) argues is indicative of government policy on vocational training at every level.

2. Resistance

Resistance to postgraduate WBL programmes was reported in the interviews conducted in all the case study universities, and took three main forms: the perception that WBL was taking students from other disciplines; the view that WBL involved a 'watering down' of intellect and standards; and an unwillingness to get involved in WBL programmes because of a lack of incentives.

In university A, resistance appears to be linked to the weak relationship which exists between the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL) and the university Schools, and the limited degree of communication emanating from the Centre has fuelled a fear and resentment in the university that the CLL is 'taking their students and thus their resources'.

The Head of Research at university B placed the situation in the context of what she described as 'the current economic situation in Higher Education', and accepted that WBL could be seen as poaching students from other academic disciplines and acting as a threat to academic standards:

Another form of resistance is where other academics see work-based learning in its transdisciplinary mode being a watering down of intellect, standards and of what higher education should stand for, and I think this university encounters that as much as anyone.

On the other hand, we found a difference of view at this university, for the Director of the Centre argued that WBL does not take students away from the academic disciplines 'because it is a very different path to go down'.

At university C, staff highlighted the lack of financial incentive for academic staff to get involved in WBL programmes because of changes which had taken place in the method of calculating workloads, which were seen as no longer encouraging involvement. As the WBL lecturer commented:

Well without being too political, there is internal resistance at the moment because we do have differences of opinion, and a lot of this is down to work constraints and work load issues.

This resistance could be related to WBL programmes with the workplace as a source of the curriculum which can cause tension as academics have to relinquish control of the curriculum and share the assessment and this raises some issues of professional control with which many feel very uncomfortable.

3. Constraints

A number of the staff we interviewed commented on quality issues in relation to WBL programmes. At university B, for example, the Director of the Centre pointed out that the quality assurance procedures are more stringent than those for many other university programmes. Programmes of this nature have many unique characteristics which lead them to be put under the spotlight. This can, of course, be seen as both a strength and a weakness of such programmes, depending upon where one is sitting.

Other constraints on the further development of such programmes identified by our interviewees included: government funding not taking account of WBL; WBL programmes being labour intensive and expensive to run; difficulties experienced in providing the flexibility needed by WBL students; and a lack of management support. Regarding government funding, the Business Development Director at university C commented that it does not take account of WBL and 'the government assumes that what all academics do is teach, and therefore all the funding is geared to students, teaching, teaching hours

and full-time equivalent students'. At the same time, demand for postgraduate WBL programmes, according to her was outstripping supply, and therefore additional resources were needed if the area was to grow. The Programme Leader at the same university felt that involvement in WBL programmes was 'pushing the boundaries', yet the system offered little support: 'We don't see HEFCE and QAA as our friends, we see them reinforcing and ossifying the current system.' For the staff at university C, the lack of flexibility in the funding system was hindering developments in WBL programmes.

WBL programmes were said to be labour intensive and therefore costly to run. The Programme Manager at university A observed that when the Centre for Lifelong Learning offers work to the Schools, the School will expect funding to follow, otherwise it does not want the work because it is resource intensive. On the other hand, if the Schools do deliver more WBL modules because they are generating income, then this can create resource problems for them because they are not always able to recruit the additional staff members they need. A key challenge here, then, is that pump-priming is required in order to have the staff available to deliver the programmes. Also, as the Higher Education Academy Report (2006, 56) argues, as WBL is typically more resource intensive than many other modes of learning:

More flexible and improved public funding models aligned to the increased use of co-financing arrangements (the State, employer and individual) in funding higher level (work-based) learning will need to be worked through to ensure that the benefits can be realised on all sides.

The difficulty experienced in providing the flexibility required by WBL students was seen as another barrier to the effective expansion of WBL programmes. The Director of the Centre at university B said that the major problem in managing WBL programmes at the Centre were structural, in that students registered at the Centre differed from the mainstream student population in that they were studying at distance, often only visiting the Centre once a semester: 'It is providing that flexibility that is not driven on the same scale as the undergraduate which is sometimes difficult, given that the university is still dominated by the concept of students coming onto campus'.

Thus our research points to resistance to WBL programmes taking many different forms, ranging from practical issues impacting on the motivation of academics to get involved, such as a lack of financial incentives, to more fundamental issues, such as political opposition to what has been called 'academic capitalism' (Taylor *et al*, 2002, p.137). For WBL to move from being a minority provision to a mainstream activity will clearly require a significant step change at the level of practice, and government policy needs to be seen in this context.

Conclusions

It was noted at the beginning of the paper that a key priority of the government's strategy for HE is the expansion of WBL. The interviews with national senior policy advisors and documentary analysis of policy papers clearly point to the government strategy for higher education having an explicit

vocational agenda. One of the HEFCE policy advisors commented that WBL is becoming more important and that it 'is moving up on the list of priorities'. The increasing demand for vocational programmes continues unabated as students look for courses that they anticipate will provide direct employment benefits.

Whilst a number of benefits of WBL for all the main parties concerned have undoubtedly materialised, as outlined and discussed in an earlier section of the paper and briefly below, these have in the main been pretty localised within the universities studied. Given also that these are universities which have made some concerted efforts on the WBL front, we suspect that the picture elsewhere is unlikely to be any better, in the sense at least of being more widespread. This suspicion has some support from the CHERI/KPMG Report to HEFCE (2006a, 78), which notes that 'learner in the workplace' programmes have 'yet to achieve widespread take-up'. Whilst this project was focussed upon employer views of WBL, and often the Report conflates sub-degree, undergraduate, and postgraduate programmes in its narrative, its findings are nonetheless indicative in relation to postgraduate programmes, and the Report does explicitly refer to them at various points. The positive findings for WBL programmes should also be seen in the wider institutional context of a lack of awareness and interest on the behalf of academic staff, resistance to such programmes and constraints to implementation. This clearly presents a fundamental challenge to the government agenda for reform. What is more, whilst the government has made partnership working between industry and HE a priority, it takes time for funding arrangements to

filter down to the local level, and delays in lead-in times are adversely affecting developments in the field. The particular funding arrangements in place are not gaining management support for WBL developments.

Thus we find a disjuncture between government policy and practice. This is due in particular to apathy and resistance to WBL on the behalf of university academic staff who are not involved in WBL (the majority) -the 'non-converts'- and to the range of constraints which operate at the local university level. Government policy towards HE since the 1980s has emphasised the employability of graduate students and HE's contribution to economic competitiveness. Combined with the intensifying role of central government in HE through directing funding, the introduction of an enhanced inspection/quality assurance regime, and a stronger managerial orientation, it can be argued that British universities have been through some of the most far reaching changes that have occurred in the history of higher education. One of the outcomes of these changes has been an undermining of the role of academics; as Taylor *et al* (2002, 138) argue:

The growth of vocational models of education has reduced the academics' professional autonomy, and severely undermined their critical capacities; and the increasing invasion of mandatory corporate capital perspectives have reduced the academic role, in some contexts, to that of 'passive trainer'.

The result appears to be that many academics have been pushed into a corner where they feel that the only way to deal with such challenges to their autonomy and professional ethics is to resist developments such as WBL.

Government initiatives such as WBL, particularly at postgraduate level, do not fit readily into HEFCE funding streams. This makes their pursuit difficult, because higher education institutions focus on where the funding is concentrated, and winning over senior management becomes more difficult. As Reeve and Gallacher (2003) have pointed out, WBL developments in UK universities are limited and marginal to more mainstream activities. In order for WBL to gain a higher profile and wider dissemination across universities, government funding arrangements need to be more flexible, so that, for example, ring-fenced funding is available for innovative WBL developments.

In the localised arenas in which they have been introduced, there was evidence that WBL programmes were changing traditional approaches to teaching and learning within English universities. At university A, the WBL Programme Leader felt that flexible delivery and the recognition that not everybody can fit within the standard programmes pointed to new and evolving approaches to teaching and learning. He felt that there was now student autonomy in the assessment design process: 'Our assessment encourages the ability within the student to design their programme to meet their own needs by the flexibility they have in the assessment.' The WBL programmes at university B have gained recognition for their originality and distinctiveness amongst the national WBL community.

A major challenge here, though, is that such programmes and approaches have only recently begun to find wider dissemination across the respective

institutions, and therefore have not seriously challenged the traditional approaches to teaching and learning still to be found there. At university C, on the other hand, it would appear that WBL programmes have started to influence traditional teaching and learning approaches across the university through the development of a 'Learning Contract'. In so far as WBL options are offered on other programmes, such as the MBA, then initiatives such as this, and the consequent reduced attendance requirement, seem likely to become more embedded.

Postgraduate WBL programmes are in many ways unique and at the leading edge of developments in learning and knowledge generation and dissemination, and yet they remain at the periphery of developments within HE. If WBL programmes at postgraduate level are not taking hold within HE, then this raises serious doubts about policy and practice across the sector, as it is arguably at the postgraduate level that there is the best chance of this occurring. Research points to a lack of 'organizational fit' for WBL programmes in areas such as standard teaching delivery patterns, workload models and government funding. These factors, combined with organizational constraints and non-awareness and resistance on the behalf of academics, go some way to explaining why innovative WBL programmes still represent a minority of the overall provision.

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